

## **“The lady is not returning!<sup>1</sup>”: Educational precarity and a social haunting in the UK coalfields.**

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**Abstract:**

Drawing on research in de-industrialised coal-mining communities in the north of England, this article focuses on how experiences of some young people might be approached through a notion of precarity linked to the idea of a 'social haunting' of the coalfields. Concentrating on data gathered in the period after the 2010 change of UK government, the article considers how localities suffering under the impact of 'austerity' measures have also witnessed moments of vivid, carnivalesque resurgence linked to celebrations of the death of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in April 2013 and of the thirtieth anniversary of the 1984-85 UK miners' strike during 2014-2015. These celebrations mark a watershed in the cultural and affective life of the communities, one aspect of which relates to how young people with very different educational trajectories have become involved alongside each other in those events as a result of their different experiences of precarity.

**Keywords:** precarity, youth, coal-mining areas, social haunting

## Introduction

It's now more than 30 years since the year-long British miners' strike against pit closures began in 1984. The scale of deindustrialisation that has taken place since then is extraordinary when one reflects on it. In 1984, around 250 mines across England, Scotland and Wales employed towards a quarter of a million workers in Britain's coal-mining industry. By the mid-1990s, most of these pits had gone. Today, just two – one in Yorkshire, one in Nottinghamshire; both with closure dates – are all that remain. Drawing on material and ideas developed during a still on-going ethnographic inquiry<sup>2</sup> which commenced around ten years ago in 2006<sup>3</sup>, I focus here on how the notion of precarity might help us understand some recent experiences of young people who have grown up in a group of former coal-mining communities in the north of England during this terminal period of the UK deep-mined coal industry.

As time has gone by, my overall ethnographic inquiry (see Bright, 2011a; 2011b; 2012a; 2012b; 2012c) has effectively grown into an investigation of two parts, punctuated by a change of UK government in 2010. While the geographical field of inquiry – former pit villages in South Yorkshire and the northern part of Derbyshire – has remained the same throughout, it has become increasingly clear with hindsight that the character of much of the data that I've gathered has steadily changed, particularly during the last three or four years. During that time, some oddly uneven developments have been discernible in the former coalfields. As we'll see below, the already economically precarious sites in which I've carried out my research have suffered increasingly negative impacts as a result of 'austerity' measures introduced by the UK Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government (cuts now deepened under the new majority Conservative government). At the same time, however, this generally negative trajectory has been interrupted in the last period by moments of vivid, carnivalesque resurgence linked to celebrations of the death of former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, in April 2013 and of the thirtieth anniversary of the 1984-85 UK miners' strike during 2014-2015.

These celebrations, I would suggest, mark some kind of a watershed in the cultural and affective life of the communities. Signally, the magnitude and audacity of these events surprised observers and coalfield activists alike. In a flowering of creative panache, DIY forms of social action not seen in the communities for a generation were revitalised, intergenerational connections remade and, in some cases, what were originally quite small-scale, local campaigns<sup>4</sup> around coalfield issues have gained unexpected national prominence as a result of widespread coverage in social media. More importantly for the discussion here, though, is the way in which celebrations came to involve young people from different fractions of the working-class and with quite different educational trajectories – some educationally marginalised, some not – in rallies, protests and demonstrations. Indeed, this last aspect alone has prompted me to review one of the main conclusions that I drew from the early phase of my work, as I'll discuss presently.

I'll begin, though, by describing the early phase of my research between 2006 and 2011 and outlining the overall conclusions that I drew from that. I'll then move on to look at what I'm calling the watershed period and indicate its double aspect: first, by describing the intensification of social and economic precariousness as evidenced by the latest coalfield labour market research and some ethnographic field notes and interview data of my own; second, by looking at the moments of resurgence that have occurred during the last two years. At that point I'll indicate why, following Avery Gordon (1997), I now regard the UK coalfields as a specific case of a 'social

haunting'. Turning then to the literature on precarity, I'll outline its general shape and draw specific attention to some recent work by Beverley Skeggs. Reading Skeggs' contribution alongside my own field data and in light of my deployment of the notion of social haunting, I'll conclude by looking at evidence that something hopeful is happening as what Skeggs calls classed practices of precarity – long familiar in the coalfields – are combining with new forms of neoliberal precarity to bring together the interests of young people traditionally divided by educational attainment.

### **A coalfield ethnography of school disaffection**

Now, the central argument of *all* my work since 2006 has basically been that aspects of the 1984-85 miners' strike and its aftermath of pit closures are not matters of merely historical interest but are, rather, a continuing – if, more often than not, unspoken – *affective context* for the lived experience of thousands of young people within Britain's former coalfields. In the *early* phase of my ethnographic work (up to about 2011) I focussed on the experiences and attitudes of those who were leaving school with only basic qualifications and who might well have found employment within and around the coal industry, had it still been in existence. I worked, indeed, mainly with those labelled 'disaffected from education' in the jargon of the time. Instead of framing their responses to schooling as a symptom of social pathology, though, I argued that it might productively be seen as an affective aspect of local historical geographies of collective resistance and conflict relating to the events of 1984-85.

Commonly, my teenage participants – mainly from families that formerly made their living in the coal-mining industry – were experiencing a host of factors that made their relationship to education and schooling difficult to maintain. Most of them had, in fact, been permanently or temporarily excluded from school, subject to 'managed moves' or 'invited not to attend'. Remarkably, every single young person that I'd spent time with between 2006 and 2011 – around a hundred or so – was familiar, *as a matter of course*, with some combination of more than two or three of the following: family breakdown, long term unemployment, chronic disease, disability, alcoholism, sexual abuse (including rape), drug use and overdose related death, arrest and strip search, Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), custodial sentences, curfew orders, parental imprisonment, suicide, accidental death, eviction, and domestic violence. They were, in short, a highly precarious group by any general definition of the term.

### **Initial conclusions: A kind of haunting**

Trying to get at the *felt* situatedness of these young people's lived experience, I endeavoured to articulate a theoretically informed, critical ethnographic practice that drew on scholarship in the following relevant areas: the 'affective turn' in social theory (Clough, 2007; Massumi, 2002); recent work on affective communities (Walkerline, 2010 and 2012) and affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009 and 2014); work looking at relationally embodied 'psychic economies' of class (Reay, 2005; Skeggs, 2010); and contributions in memory studies and human geography (Edensor, 2005). Such an approach, I envisaged, might help frame an ethnographic space attuned to the intensities of collective affect as those intensities moved through spatialities similar to what Raymond Williams had called "structures of feeling" (Williams 1975; 1977).

In the light of fieldwork experience seen through the lens of these readings, it seemed apparent that a kind of ‘ghosted’ affective atmosphere continued to endure within the specific coalfield context, even a generation after the pits had closed. In subtle but discernible ways, such an atmosphere seemed to be influencing the attitudes of my participants towards their education. It appeared to be the un-named context of their almost ubiquitous sense of fury and their need to “fight back” against what they perceived as the imposition, through schooling, of an alien middle-class culture. Twenty five years after it ended, the 1984-85 strike was everywhere and nowhere as young people from neighbouring villages, using received categories of solidarity and vilification with equal facility, continued to fight out (literally) coalfield conflicts going back to the 1930s about which they knew virtually nothing. My research repeatedly registered, for example, a form of ‘knowing without knowing’ that was more than mere tacit knowledge, habitus, or embodied collective memory and which registered only at the very edge of the effable.

Those who worked with the young people would also often talk about fixated repetitions in a halted time where the industry and its culture were rapidly being “rubbed out” but, at the same time, were refusing to go. Such repetitions, they suggested, were embodied in the very comportment of local youth in ways that evidently provoked the wrath of school authorities with unfailing ease. Stacey, a youth worker working with school excludes in 2008, made this point vividly: “Yeah, definitely, definitely... you know I’ve had kids that were second generation, you know, their parents weren’t even miners but, you know, they still say: ‘Aye, it’s the fucking miners strike!’” Others often talked about some kind of “haunting” taking place.

In summary then, the first phase of my research alerted me to what seemed to be a structure of feeling or atmosphere that was particular to the historical geographies of the de-industrialised coalfields. Characteristic of this was a kind of half-life, but nevertheless still potent, continuation of that “very clear sense of the past as struggle” (Fentress and Wickham, 1992: 115) that had always been prominent in the coalfields and remained hidden in plain sight after the pits had closed. In my observation, some significant numbers of local young people were somehow lodged in this psychosocial space. Unconsciously reprising the affective repertoire of their collective past while at the same time being severed from any conscious memory of it by the socially necessary silences (Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012) that surrounded it, they seemed unable to contextualise the sense of estrangement in which their history and geography apparently fixed them. While their responses to their individual and collective situation ranged from passivity to fury, their reactions remained, with just a very few exceptions, apolitical or at best pre-political (see Bright, 2012b).

By the beginning of 2013, I had ranged frustratingly around this problematic, attempting to theorise it from a number of perspectives. I still felt, however, that I lacked a vocabulary with which to express what it was that might be happening. I could see the cultural continuities, but the vagueness of their presentiments – recognised only by insiders, in the main – militated against me making any clear claim that the widespread refusal of schooling evident in my data was an explicit continuation of local forms of insubordination. The regular appearance of ethnographic material about ‘a kind of haunting’ was compellingly luminous, but it was also depressing. As much as it evidenced resistance, it also seemed to support the idea that local communities were mired in a kind of compulsive, melancholic attachment to un-mourned trauma and that any sense of futurity had been abandoned.

And that, reluctantly, was what I concluded at time. Such a position was firmly challenged, however, during the second phase of my research.

### **Post-2010: A watershed?**

As I indicated above, the period that I now see as a watershed had a dual, even paradoxical, character. At the very same time as the austerity policies of the then new Coalition government started to bite, some dramatic coalfield ghosts suddenly made their appearance. Before we address those spectres, however, we'll have a look at my research sites during the period prior to the death of former PM Thatcher. The first post-2008 recession report on the economic plight of the former mining communities of England, Scotland and Wales (Foden *et al*, 2014) shows what was happening, concluding that:

...the miners' strike of 1984/5 may now be receding into history but the job losses that followed in its wake are still part of the everyday economic reality of most mining communities. The consequences are still all too visible in statistics on jobs, unemployment, benefits and health. (Foden *et al*, 2014: 7)

Basically, this report registered how coalfield unemployment levels had been concealed for many years as a result of an incapacity benefit system that was now being rapidly dismantled. In the period following the economic crisis, any progress in generating jobs in former coal-mining areas had faltered, leaving a situation of "substantial unemployment and in particular a very large diversion of working-age men out of the labour market into 'economic inactivity', often on incapacity benefits" (Foden *et al*, 2014: 5). There had been a "major employment shortfall" and precarious forms of work had come to predominate in the labour market that remained. Workers were "more likely to be employed in lower grade or manual occupations" (5). Deprivation was "widespread" (6), as was ill health, and the "combination of a shortfall in employment opportunities and poor health [had] resulted in exceptionally high numbers in receipt of welfare benefits" (6). Key elements of the Coalition government's welfare reform package that focused, "on reducing eligibility for incapacity and disability benefits" (25) were hitting coalfield areas especially hard. Ominously, the report warned that much of the impact was "still to be felt" (25).

On the ground, matters were indeed perilous, as conversations with two of my research participants, 'Christine' and 'Liz'<sup>5</sup>, showed. During the early phase of my research, Christine had been the manager, consecutively, of two local authority community-based youth education and support programmes in one of the research villages, Beldover, in Derbyshire. At the time of our later conversations, she was the manager of a similar programme that was now being delivered in increasingly straitened funding circumstances and with much tighter curriculum constraints. The young folk enrolled on her programme were broadly similar to those that she and I had worked with between 2006 and 2010:

In the main they haven't got any qualifications. They've either chosen not to go [to school] or been expelled or had home tutoring that's been hit and miss or been in and out of PRUs<sup>6</sup> and coming out with no qualifications.

If anything, though, their lives were even more precarious, and not only in educational terms. They were experiencing education and training provision funded from sources that were ever more precarious. The programmes themselves were being delivered by staff on increasingly precarious contracts and were aimed at preparing

the students for more precarious roles in a more precarious labour market. Their family situations were more precarious too, as public sector work disappeared in austerity cuts and disability benefits were reduced:

As DLA [Disability Living Allowance] gets challenged it'll be interesting. We've had students come who've said 'Me mum's lost her disability [allowance]'...we've had quite a few o' them. And then there's the other, the bedroom tax<sup>7</sup>. That's had an impact on families as well. [...] We've all thought there's more and more students coming through with anxiety problems and depression [...] Some of them...They've got nothing. We pay our kids their bus fares every day. If we didn't, they wouldn't come ...I think looking round here there aren't any jobs ...alright there are jobs but we all know what they are, they're part time, low paid and there's nil hours contracts everywhere. Zero hours contracts. So you can't get a *proper* job! At [one very large private sector sports clothing manufacturer] you have to wait forty minutes in a queue at the end of each shift waiting while you are checked! [for stolen goods, by company security]

Precarity had become, we might say, the everyday context of lives in the former coal-mining communities – something that Christine viewed as part of a still unfolding 'grand plan', aimed at finally dealing with the remnants of the 'enemy within'<sup>8</sup>:

It's part o' the grand plan in't it, eh? I do wonder if, like, in ten years time we're gonna be almost back in Victorian days...an' all benefit's getting chopped. You know, it is part o' this grand plan o' this Tory government and now they're in they're gonna make it that. (Christine, in Bright 2012a: 224)

Liz's account of the mood of the locality in the period between 2010 and 2013 concurred with that of Christine:

[It's] like a place that is dead [...] An apathy. It's just grey. Humour? It's not the same. It's been strangled. There's no colour. It's grey [...] People knew. [In the strike] they knew each other. There was something. [Now] foodbanks? They're queuing at 8.00 in the morning. I mean, where the fuck are we? Their eyes! They've so had things done to them.

Responsible for adult and community learning and also based in Beldover, Liz, when I last spoke to her, was making do by improvising desperately within ever tighter funding constraints in an endeavour to meet community needs:

I've been putting on so-called Family Learning cookery: 'Cookery on a Budget'. After school. And the reason we are doing that, I'll be honest with you, is because they're cooking and they're taking [the food] home. They're making loads, so it'll last. People are really hungry

Generally, then, lives in my coalfield research sites were looking increasingly hopeless, as the enforced precarity of 'austerity' was taking the measure of daily uncertainty back to levels not seen since the days of hardship under the private coal owners. In the run up to Thatcher's death in 2013, the general air of depression, bitterness and apathy that had cast an intergenerational shadow over the twenty year period of pit closures seemed insurmountable as the lives of those left at the margin of deindustrialisation – including my 'disaffected' participants – sank into deeper jeopardy. But the long-awaited death of the former Prime Minister changed that over the course of a few days, as local events in the coalfield took a remarkable turn.

**“Iron Lady – Rust in peace”<sup>9</sup>: Funerals, resurgence and a social haunting**

In April 2013, one of the last remaining pits in the UK – Maltby, in South Yorkshire (about 12 miles from my research site) – closed, and was commemorated by the people of the town holding a funeral ceremony. A week or so later, the funeral of Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister at the time of the miners’ strike of 1984-85, took place, prompting celebrations in the heartlands of 1984-85 strike, including a *mock* funeral that was held in Goldthorpe, again in South Yorkshire<sup>10</sup>. In both Maltby and Goldthorpe, the complex affective legacy of the absent coal-mining industry to which I’d nervously been drawing attention in my published work was clearly evident. The two events were very different in character, however. Indeed, I’d argue that the few days between the Maltby funeral and the Goldthorpe funeral marked the specific watershed to which I’m drawing attention. As can be seen from the local TV coverage<sup>11</sup>, the Maltby funeral, earnest and grave as it was, struggled to find a rhetorical form appropriate to the loss it endeavoured to articulate. One trope of coalfield grieving was layered uneasily, even excessively, on top of another as the colliery brass band played the ‘disaster hymn’ *Gresford* and the local vicar officiated in prayers over the burial of a lump of coal at the churchyard ‘grave of the unknown miner’. While the hurt was obviously real, the footage has an air of rehearsed conventionality in its too emphatic performance of a dignified and well-behaved community united in its grief. The Goldthorpe Thatcher funeral, however, was very different, its raw anger and creatively insubordinate energy – not seen since the strike – contrasting so markedly with the banality of the Maltby interment. I tried to capture the resurgent (even *insurgent*) character of the Goldthorpe funeral in this field note:

*The Goldthorpe Thatcher funeral took a lot of us by surprise, as it seemed to come from nowhere. Even a week or so ago at the OTJC<sup>12</sup> meeting, there were a few rumours that there might be a bonfire in one of the villages but nobody expected anything like this. What took place at Goldthorpe was extraordinary – a spectacular, improvised re-embodiment of the resistant, sometimes riotous, energy of the 84-85 strike. The pilloking<sup>13</sup> slogans on home made banners – “The Lady’s not Returning!”, “Iron Lady, Rust in Peace” and so on – the rows of blackened, boarded-up terraced pit houses strung with bunting; a ‘miner’ in black-face; a Thatcher effigy leaning against the wall of the Comrades Club prior to being loaded onto a horse-drawn hearse and carried in procession by a crowd of men, women, kids and old folks through the village to waste land where it was set alight to cheers and cries of ‘Scab! Scab! Scab!’ Watching the TV coverage – which has gone viral – the shock of this carnival of cathartic release is obvious: a TV presenter is heard saying to a retired miner she interviews: “It’s as if you’re in a time warp”. Her interviewee pauses momentarily, stunned, as temporal logics clash, then adds uncomprehendingly: “We **are** in a time warp!”. As if anyone could miss that. This is a haunting. The past is present. Every face looks simultaneously backwards and forwards like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history; every move has been rehearsed in a theatre of memory brought right up to date as teenagers carry their grandfathers’ banners calling for utopias long dispossessed in a neoliberal present of ‘zero hours’ call centre work, the bedroom tax and benefits hassle.*

These phenomena spoke firmly and clearly to an idea I was beginning to work with at that time: Avery Gordon’s notion of a ‘social haunting’ (Gordon, 1997). Gordon’s idea harnesses literature, history, social theory, visual art and psychoanalysis to develop a hybrid inter-disciplinary inquiry directed toward the “blind field” of social inquiry as it manifests in the troublingly absent presence within the present, of occluded pasts. As such, the idea has traction for any investigation of how contested pasts carry affective loads which nevertheless powerfully mould, and



are themselves (re)moulded by, the present. According to Gordon, a social haunting is an entangling reminder of lingering trouble relating to “social violence done in the past” and a notification “that what’s been concealed is very much alive and present [and] showing up without any sign of leaving” (1997: xvi.). While the general idea that the past acts in the present is nothing new, the specific notion of a social haunting does break new ground as it is a “socio-political-psychological state” that is

...precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long a duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, *something different from before, seems like it must be done*” (original emphasis. Gordon 1997: xvi).

Thus, contrary to the stuck repetitions of melancholia, a social haunting – and this is particularly emphasized in Gordon’s conception – announces a political imperative of future *action*. To get hold of the real significance of this for the coalfields, I want to turn, now, to the academic literature on precarity. I’ll pick up the empirical thread again as the ghosts that so sturdily proclaimed their presence during the Thatcher death celebrations of 2013 began to gather a new and significantly different audience during 2014-2015, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the 1984-85 strike.

### **Precarity**

While familiar in continental European sociology since the 1960s<sup>14</sup>, ‘precarity’ is a term that has only really made a significant appearance in English language academic literature during the last ten years or so. As Waite (2009) has usefully shown, that literature can be seen as encompassing two streams of thought. One stream theorises precarity as a condition of the global North resulting from “generalized societal malaise and insecurity...fragility and powerlessness of human existence in the face of oppressive everyday governmentality”<sup>15</sup> (413). The other stream emphasises the condition of precarity as specific to contemporary times and emanating primarily from labour market experiences. From this perspective, precarity is identified as a labour market phenomenon that appears at a specific post-Fordist moment and is associated with changing economic landscapes, intensifying trajectories of neoliberalism, globalisation and mobility. Within this second stream, precarity “is conceived as both a condition and as a possible point of mobilisation among those experiencing precarity (416). It thus allows a new *political subjectivity* of potential contemporary social transformation (see Standing, 2011, 2014; Berardi, 2009) to be constituted and a new political force, the ‘precariat’, to be announced.

Both of these streams are productive when applied to the coalfield context, but the second is particularly so. It identifies a host of features specific to globalised neoliberal capitalism and thus has the advantage of locating precarity in a specific historical moment of political economy that has seen extensive deindustrialisation in the West. It also attempts to derive a critical political project from the experience of precarity. Neither account, however, seems to recognise precarity as a *lived experience of class* – an omission that seems gravely remiss in places like the coalfields where precarity of life, livelihood and limb is anything but new. Some of Beverley Skeggs’ recent work, however, offers an account that does include this aspect of precarity, and it is highly relevant here.

### **Classed habits of precarity and an ethic of relationality**

In her 2011 article, 'Imagining personhood differently: person value and autonomist working-class value practices' (Skeggs, 2011), Beverley Skeggs focuses on lived experiences of classed value production as "contingent and situational, based on practices, on how value can be lived and materialised, carried, inscribed and recognised on bodies, on persons and in practices" (509). Skeggs' central aim is to explore personhood as inhabited by those who are "positioned as the constitutive limit to the *proper* person" (497, my emphasis). As she pursues that aim, it becomes clear that precarity is a key context in the lives of working-class people that she describes as "excluded from the fields of value accrual" (509). At this point, Skeggs' descriptions are completely resonant with many that are repeated throughout my own work. Coalfield localities – castigated, as we've already noticed, as the domain of the "enemy within" (surely the *ultimate* limit of proper personhood?) – are commonly positioned as home to people who, like Skeggs' participants:

...do not have access to the dominant symbolic circuits of personhood legitimation from where they can attach dominant symbolic value to themselves; those not just denied access but positioned as the constitutive limit to proper personhood: the abject, the use-less subject who only consists of lacks and gaps, voids and deficiencies, sentimental repositories, sources of labour, negative value that cannot be attached or accrued and may deplete the value of others through social contagion. (503)

Throughout my data, there are numerous instances where working-class inhabitants of the former pit villages are characterised in this manner within unofficial service provider 'canteen cultures'. Fortunately, the *re-legitimation of value practices* that Skeggs emphasizes as crucial to her respondents is also powerfully visible. My respondents, like Skeggs' can be seen reacting to their "constant de-grading [by] establish[ing] which practices [are] just and with value". As they routinely enter "different, nearly always local, circuits of value and generat[e] alternative values about 'what/who matters', 'what/who counts' and what is just" they also, again like Skeggs' informants, invariably experience 'ugly feelings' towards "those who [judge and misrecognise] their value" (505-506). There is also the same emphatic wish *not* to be middle class but, rather, to give "time, energy and attention...to a supportive sociality" (504). There is also the same ducking and diving, the same looking out for each other in "localized spaces of protection [and] fun". There is, too, the same making the best of "limited circumstances in the present where the future seem[s] bleak and their best chance of value [is] moral and affective not financial" (504). In short, my work – like Skeggs' – contains a plethora of evidence showing the lived production of a set of "autonomist [working-class values] based on reciprocity, care, shared understandings of injustice, and insecurity" (509)...that are invariably "imperceptible to the bourgeois gaze" (496). Interestingly, Skeggs underlines how "habits of precarity" are central to this set of values, as "precarious employment is still a historically haunting or ever-present reality for the working-classes" (504).

In Skeggs' account, *historical* precarity, as it haunts the lived present of working-class people, young and old, is the producer of the distinctive working-class value practice of *relationality*, where value is created in "time and energy with and for others" (509). Relationality, explicitly, is an ethic that runs counter to two other models of value: capitalism's 'extractive' model being one, and the middle class value of accruing "time and energy on self development" (509) being the other. Taking the position that "sociality is formed through different material conditions", this perspective – and this is vital to what I'm arguing here – allows us to "see *other ways*

*of living*” (509. My emphasis). This generative capacity – whereby a set of values, themselves engendered *by* precarity, can in fact *prefigure* a mode of sociality beyond the limitations of the extractive and acquisitive value models that generate that precarity in the first place – is what I want to highlight. It is an account that potentially links the two phases of my research and allows me to argue that relationality is the long repressed, but now resurgent, potentiality that is specific to the social haunting of the coalfields. It is its specific *something different from before* that needs to be done. As such, it enables a positive re-evaluation of my earlier and somewhat pessimistic conclusions. Let me explain how this works.

### **Prefiguring another way of living**

As even the slightest acquaintance with the social and labour history of coalfield communities would show, enactment of another way of living has been a key feature of a catalogue of collective actions against precariousness (of one form or another) over a two hundred year period<sup>16</sup>. Historically, actions against lockouts, evictions, black-listings, interventions by police and troops and so on generally shifted very quickly from industrial to community forms, as extensive practices of relationality were inaugurated. In 1984-85, such practices were central to the strike against pit closures lasting for a whole year, and the failure of such practices to sustain community during the subsequent period of deindustrialisation has been perceived as a grievous loss. Certainly, defence of ‘another way of living’ based on the lived relationality of solidarity was a predominant element of the general response to schooling among those young people that I worked with during 2006 through 2010<sup>17</sup>. It was, of course, glibly dismissed as a belligerent form of outmoded nostalgia – a misrecognition that in its arrogance erased what I would argue has turned out to be the most enduring feature of the 1984-85 strike: its prefigurative quality.

Now, I’m not alone in arguing that something very important was being missed here. In a chapter in Popple and Macdonald’s 2102 volume, *Digging the Seam: Popular cultures of the 1984/5 miners’ strike*, Mark Sanders develops an argument that resonates with what I’m saying here. “Constellat[ing] the 1984-85 miners’ strike with the Chartist mass strike of 1842”, with the aim of “restor[ing] it to the metanarrative of the class struggle” Sanders traces what he calls the “*political unconscious*” (my emphasis) underlying the “deep-seated historical impulses towards economic and political freedom” [and, we might reasonably add, ‘relationality’] of the working classes” (Sanders, 2012: 18). Basically, Sanders argues that the “activities of the miners and their supporters [in the 1984-85 strike] created ... structures which prefigured the forms of socialist society implied by their economic and political analysis” (18). Those activities enacted, if we might describe it from Skeggs’ perspective, a sociality of *relationality* and raised, thereby, the possibility of *another way of living* as immanently present within the strike.

Extrapolating from Sanders’ point, via Skeggs’ discussion of value, to Gordon’s account, one might reasonably argue that such prefiguration of *a way of living relationally*, its vicious erasure by the social violence of the state during the 1984-85 strike, its subsequent displacement into the social unconscious, and its first escape from repression in places such as Goldthorpe in 2013, are the central aspects of the social haunting of the coalfields. Relationality, we might say, is precarity’s denied ‘other’ and, as precarity is neoliberal capitalism’s characteristic form, relationality is therefore neoliberalism’s nemesis; that is, it stands utterly and permanently against it as a living possibility of persons being ‘valued otherwise’ than they are in value

regimes based on extraction or accrual. As we'll remember from Gordon (1997), a social haunting is always made evident through a moment "when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away" (xvi), and we saw extensive evidence of that with the Thatcher funerals. A haunting is always more, however, than spectres made visible and the time being out of joint. A social haunting, if I can reiterate this yet again, announces that *something different from before, must be done*. Relationality – instantiated as a set of alternative value practices about what/who matters, what/who counts and what is just (as Skeggs put it) – could be viewed as *precisely* the 'something different' that must be done if the ghosts of the defeat of the 1984-85 strike are finally to be laid. As such, it is potentially a substantive rallying call. What is more, there is evidence that some young people were beginning to make the link and were, as it were, heeding that call.

### **Resurgent relationality: The 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year**

That a fresh mood was abroad in my research localities after Thatcher's death was becoming obvious by March 2014, when celebrations of the thirtieth anniversary of the 1984-85 strike began<sup>18</sup>. By that time, a new audience had been brought together that included an unusually mixed set of young people who were being drawn to the relational way of living that the strike can be said to have exemplified. Some of these had undoubtedly become curious as a result of wide social media coverage of the Thatcher funerals. Others, from families who had been through the strike, were now hearing their grandparents, parents and relatives speak about their experiences with an emotional freedom that only seemed possible after the catharsis of Thatcher's death. These young people were often from that very group – positioned as marginalised and disaffected – that had participated in the pre-2010 phase of my work; the ones who had seemed so troublingly trapped in unconscious repetitions of a conflict that they couldn't name; the ones suffering directly as their families fell foul of austerity measures; the ones who nearly everyone had written off as minions of a loutish and probably politically dangerous "white working class". When linked explicitly through the celebration events to their affective inheritance, however, they proved themselves able to deploy a rhetoric, iconography, and ethics of relational counter value with intuitive grasp and, in some cases, with extraordinary facility, as this field note registers:

*In Goldthorpe again today, Saturday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014, for the celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the 1984-85 strike. Called "Digging up black gold" it was, again, based at the Comrades Club. Towards the end of the day, I stood in the club concert room – converted to a 'soup kitchen' for the day – and watched a young woman diligently decorating a plate with an emblem of a miner's lamp. Sitting slightly to the side of a group of older local women, she worked at her task with wonderful draughtswomanship and an instinctive eye for the vernacular iconography of the coalfields and freely drew her design without any template or guide. It was quite amazing to watch, and I told her so. She paused, telling me she didn't really know why she was doing it because "I dun't know owt [anything] about all this. I've just come wi' me mum". She said she was 17, interested in art but studying 'care' at the local college, her future firmly ensconced in the precarious territory of short contract affective labour. As I watched her intently, she stopped, looked up and quietly asked me "What do you write on 'em? They all have summat written on 'em.*

*What is it?" I fumbled for an answer and didn't do very well. Not really needing an answer, she turned back to her task and – negotiating the visual rhetoric of coalfield memorialisation with intuitive ease – went on, faultlessly, to inscribe the amulet: "Lights will guide you home. Gone but not forgotten".*

Meanwhile, and interestingly, some of these young people's educationally more 'successful' peers were also being drawn to the legacy of the strike. Having entered an expanded higher education system in the heady days before the economic crisis of 2008 they were now finding themselves to be precarious graduates unable to make the social transition that 'widening participation' strategies had ostensibly offered them. Politicised by their own experiences of protest against student debt and labour market stagnation, this group of young people – often, but not always, from former coal-mining families – were developing a growing awareness of the links between their personal plight and local histories of coalfield social and labour conflict, as conversations with Adam and Angelika<sup>19</sup>, two young graduates both in their early twenties, revealed. Adam and Angelika were both eager to discuss the impact of the miners' strike on their own lives, and sought me out independently of each other, at a 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary event<sup>20</sup> that they attended. Adam, a young filmmaker, said he wanted to talk about how much the strike had come to mean for him as he'd found out more and more about it after having done an academic project on the topic. Having grown up in, and now returned to, one of north Derbyshire's pit villages, he spoke fervently of how he now saw the strike as the key context of his family life and of his own identity:

Mining heritage runs in my family on both my mum and dad's side. As a young child I vividly remember my Grandma flaring up whenever Thatcher was mentioned on TV. My Grandad went on strike and was also a flying picket [...] his phone was tapped [...] They were all working against the police state.

Though he'd been aware of "some anger towards something political" even as a child, local silences redoubled the sense of an absent presence: "In my home town, there are still people who don't talk to one another in the streets when they meet". Effectively, the strike only became personally relevant when, as a student from a working-class background, Adam started to develop a sense of his own difference. Still a student at the time of the death of Margaret Thatcher, the event was highly significant for him, confirming his sense of difference from the students around him and linking him firmly to what he sees as the coalfields' legitimate sense of grievance:

It was great on the day Thatcher died, I told people how glad I was and all I got was 'But she was someone's grandmother!' [or] 'That's a bit harsh!' I was mad because of their ignorance. I felt the need to educate as well as shoot a few down, making them aware of the actions and events of the strike and to why it is still relevant today.

Angelika travelled to the same event as Adam from her university in Wolverhampton, purely because of her growing interest in the 1984-85 strike. A child of relatively recent Polish economic migrants to the UK, she described herself as initially having "no *emotional* attachment to the miners' strike" (her emphasis) until, as an undergraduate student in photography, she was introduced to Jeremy Deller's film *The Battle of Orgreave*, a reconstruction of the notoriously heavily policing of miners' mass pickets of the Orgreave coking plant in South Yorkshire during June 1984. Her curiosity aroused by "doing a project about protest rather than being in

protest itself”, she became increasingly aware of what she called the “injustices” of the strike as part of a political awakening stirred by her own subsequent experience of actual protest:

I was at the big TUC protest November 2011. It was good to feel the power of people but the BBC showed a picture of Hyde Park *empty*. I was fuming! I couldn’t believe that was what was happening. We just got angry! Where have we *been* all this time?

Having felt “the power”, Angelika became an enthusiastic participant in the student protests that followed: a salutary experience for her as she felt, for the first time, her own precarious life as a ‘half person’:

I then went to the NUS protest. The police were just pushing everyone. Totally different experience. There’s a weird thing about students, isn’t it? Where people just don’t see them as real people. Almost like half people. We were literally treated like we were half people.

Angelika’s ‘half person’ status links her, she feels, both to political events in her native Poland in the 1980s and to the miners strike of 1984-85, as both Solidarnosc and the miners were, in her view, positioned as half people. Having just graduated with a first class degree in photography, she feels “quite done over by the government at the minute. I’ve walked out with this First and I’m still struggling”. Her allegiance with the miners’ strike in particular has become the compass for her activism and of her identity as an artist:

To have cross generation interest and to see people meet up and talk about what’s happened and to see people so passionate... I feel inspired. To think I might still be passionate about it in thirty years, it’s quite inspirational. It goes down to: do I stay an activist? Injustice anywhere, it shouldn’t happen [...] It shouldn’t be the case. So that’s something that hopefully till the day I die I’m going to want to talk about.

## Conclusion

It is interesting that it is Angelika, a complete outsider to the intensely internalised culture of the coalfields, that can articulate precarity so perceptively and precisely as a form of ‘half’ personhood and, thus, see the legacy of the 1984-85 strike – a prefiguration of lives lived fully – as its antithesis. In doing so, she captures precarity’s multiple presentation: as a classed experience of extractive value production endured throughout capitalism’s long historical trajectory (Skeggs’ point, really), as a particularly ferocious expression of capitalism’s contemporary, globalised, neoliberal form (the principal conclusion of Waites’s ‘second stream’ precarity literature), and as a haunting reminder of political economy’s denied ‘other’ – relationality.

Basically, I’ve tried to bring out the same points with the aim of using precarity as a key notion, first, to review the conclusions I’d previously drawn from the early phase of my work in the coalfields and, second, to make a link between newly observable empirical phenomena and the theoretical construct of a social haunting that I have come to deploy. Without the bridging capacity of precarity, it would not have been possible to make sense of the growing commonality of perspective that I could see arising between two sets of working-class young people – those at the very edge of the education system, and those positioned for successful social transitions – whose interests have been assumed, at least since Willis’s *Learning to Labour*, to be completely divergent. Equally, it would have remained inordinately difficult to envisage a set of events (the accidental proximity of Margaret Thatcher’s death and

the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1984-85 miners' strike in a context of deepening and universal precariousness, for example) that might lift the repression of thirty years and allow the ghosts to speak. After all, other more obviously historic anniversaries had passed without any sense of community reinvigoration.

The ethnographic materials that I've referred to here took me, I have to admit, by surprise, speaking as they did to a sense of *futurity* that I can now firmly espouse but which, while sensing it, I had disappointedly dismissed at the conclusion of my early work. The blazing funeral pyres; the "Digging for Black Gold" in an improvised soup kitchen; the links being made to the strike by recently radicalised graduates from diverse backgrounds; the exquisite moment as a teenage working-class girl, already on a pre-vocational road to a precarious life half lived, tapped into her vernacular poetics to name her sense of belonging as a lit way home that while it is gone, is not forgotten; all of this spoke to a futurity that, as Avery Gordon has noted, is "imbricated or interwoven into the very scene of haunting itself" (Gordon 2011, no page number). Precarity, seen through the 'blind field' prism of a social haunting, proves itself, paradoxically, to be some kind of an agent of futurity. That is a haunting's "utopian grace":

...to encourage a steely sorrow laced with delight for what we lost that we never had; to long for the insight of that moment in which we recognize ...[the] profane illumination that it could have been and can be otherwise (Gordon, 1997: 57).

For the generation who have grown up through the period of coalfield deindustrialization, such a sense that worlds are not given but are, rather, made – and, thus, are always *re-makeable* – has, thankfully, once again become quite clearly visible.

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<sup>1</sup> Slogan on an improvised banner at the “Thatcher funeral” in Goldthorpe, South Yorkshire, April, 2013. The slogan is a play on beleaguered Margaret Thatcher’s 1981 declaration to the Conservative Party conference that “the lady is not for turning”.

<sup>2</sup> Initially the inquiry was a doctoral study. See Bright, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> *Working with social haunting: Past- and present-making in two communities of value*. Arts and Humanities Research Council. Jan 2015- Jan 2016. Principal Investigator: N.G. Bright.

<sup>4</sup> The *Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign*, of which the author is a member, being one.

<sup>5</sup> Conversations with Christine and Liz took place during April and May 2014. Both of these women had been active in coalfield campaigns: Christine in the anti-pit closure campaign of the 1990s and Liz in the 1984-85 strike and many other Left campaigns since.

<sup>6</sup> Pupil Referral Units – where students are referred when they have been “formally excluded” from school.

<sup>7</sup> The Bedroom Tax is a change to Housing Benefit entitlement that means that those who live in a housing association or council property that is deemed to have one or more spare bedrooms will be subject to a reduction in benefits.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Thatcher’s notorious term for striking coal miners and their families, during the 1984-85 strike.

<sup>9</sup> Slogan on another improvised banner at the Goldthorpe Thatcher funeral, April 2013

<sup>10</sup> see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYEFJMAL-7c>)

<sup>11</sup> see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8hPCSKFwE4>

<sup>12</sup> The Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, based in the South Yorkshire and Derbyshire coalfields

<sup>13</sup> The bitterly acerbic coalfield wit.

<sup>14</sup> In France, ‘*précarité*’ is a commonplace usage in contemporary public debate and has origins that run back at least to Bourdieu’s early 1960’s Algerian work.

<sup>15</sup> Butler’s notable contribution is a good example of writing taking that perspective (see Butler, 2004)

<sup>16</sup> My other published work makes explicit reference to the literature on coalfield labour and social history. See References (below).

<sup>17</sup> I had explicitly drawn attention to how prefiguration of relationality was evident in a film called “Sticking Together”, made by a group of local teenagers in 2009. See Bright 2012b.

<sup>18</sup> Many anniversary events took place throughout the coalfields and I, myself, was involved as speaker and participant in Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. I am thinking particularly here of the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign Picnic and Festival; “Digging for Black Gold” in Goldthorpe, S.Yorks; “Born in 1984”, Chesterfield, Derbyshire; and “Raise the Banners High”, Wakefield, West Yorkshire.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Adam’ and ‘Angelika’ are real names, as both insisted that their identities should be retained.

<sup>20</sup> The event was the ‘*Born in 1984*’ 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike at the Winding Wheel, Chesterfield in March 2014. I was staffing a stall on behalf of the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign. After the event, I spoke to Adam by phone and he later sent me written responses to some broad questions relating to the impact of the miners’ strike and it is this written source that I quote from here. After having a conversation with Angelika at the same event, I conversed with her again at length via Skype.